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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the best way to design a training program for prospective and current writing center tutors. The paper uses the writing center at Texas Woman's University as an example, for even after training, weekly meetings, and focused readings, peer tutors were at a loss for what to do--most of the peer tutors just were not able to get at "the art of tutoring." According to the paper, an experimental course (mandatory for those wishing to be tutors) called "Writing Center Internship" has proved to be very helpful. The paper outlines the course in detail. It explains that: the course's first phase was devoted to theory and the students' personal experiences with their own writings; the second stage was developed around student observations of tutorial sessions; the third stage had students get out and practice all they have been watching, reading, discussing, and pondering; and the fourth stage synthesizes the whole of the course agenda. The paper concludes with wisdom gleaned from experiences of the tutors-in-training. (NKA)

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Writing Center Internships: The Case for Collaboration and Integration?

Tutoring is complex. In any given tutorial session, the tutor has numerous—and often competing—forces to identify, analyze, prioritize, and then help the student address. Conceptual-level concerns fight for priority over sentence-level concerns; the student's learning styles complicate her writing processes; the instructor's imperatives demand attention, and the due date necessitates a change in plan. All of these things play important roles in any given tutorial session. And this catalogue of forces does not even begin to address the proclivities of the writing center tutor herself. No doubt some sort of interactive, conversation-based tutorial is an imperative foundation for any successful step into this cacophonous learning space. But how do we design such a training program for our prospective and current tutors?

This question has been asked, answered, debated, and then answered again since the earliest years of writing center academic discourse. Just thumb through any issue of *Writing Center Journal* or "Writing Lab Newsletter" and you're almost sure to find success stories of tutor training by student-made videos, weekly workshops, or for-credit courses. Our writing center at Texas Woman's University has tried most of these

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methods. Between each of our weekly meetings, we asked our tutors to read pages and pages of *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors* (1994) and *The St. Martin's Source Book for Writing Tutors* (1995). During our weekly meetings, tutors discussed the readings, did role playing, discussed their own writing center experiences, raised questions, offered answers, and remained, for the most part, enthusiastic about their roles as writing center tutors.

Training Tutors in our Writing Center

But here's what happened to our peer tutors, again and again: though they were enthusiastic, and though they were more than willing to apply the theory they got out of the short readings they were able to work in between writing papers and reading for their "credit" courses, they were often at a loss for what to do. They knew we did not edit. They were almost petrified to edit. But they were really unsure of what constituted editing. They knew what worked when they tutored their friends and siblings, but they were not always sure of how to establish that same sort of relationship with the "strangers" they were supposed to tutor in the writing center. In short, most of the peer tutors just weren't able to get at the "art of tutoring," however one defines it. For the most part, our tutors either put on an ill-fitting tutoring philosophy that helped them go through the motions but did not help them *understand* the motions, or they defaulted to the three tutorial sins Mary M. Dossin of SUNY-Plattsburg asserts are the result of a lack of training: they "tackle the obvious grammatical and sentence-level errors," . . . "act like detectives assigned to ferret out all the errors they can spot," . . . or "they talk too much" (11).

Our Solution

During the fall semester of 1998, we taught an experimental course, mandatory for all undergraduates who wished to become tutors called "Writing Center Internship." We've continued this practice. Next spring (2000), we will teach it again. We plan to teach this course once a year from here on out. While our idea of a "for credit" course prerequisite for writing center tutors is modeled on courses of this sort taught at Howard Payne University and the University of Texas at Austin, our methods are not. The uniqueness of this course, as well as its biggest strength, lies in its writing intensiveness. Whereas many universities offering "for credit" courses in writing center pedagogy depend on journals and in-class peer review, the writing component seems to be, for the most part, informal reflection. This course couples a comprehensive--yet informal--journal that responds to the readings, the tutorials observed and performed, and students' own writing processes with a formal, academic writing component that synthesizes various aspects of the art of tutoring. A writing-intensive component, both informal and formal methods of writing, is imperative in a course of this sort, because we must know how we learn and write before we can help others do the same (Meyer and Smith 10-22; Hey and Nahmauld 4).

The Pedagogical Basis for the Course

Our writing center's mission, like most writing centers' missions, echoes North's "Idea of a Writing Center"(1984). We want the tutorial session to help the student work towards becoming a better writer; we want student to leave their tutorial sessions with more than a "corrected" paper. While I doubt that many would disagree with such an idealistic mission, our footing slips when we start to discuss how we plan to help our peer

tutors learn to focus on the writer rather than on the paper. Our first impulse when confronted with a less-than-perfect essay is to start cleaning it up--to talk too much and direct too much. One long-time tutor likens his early tutorial experiences with the awkward first date:

> Like that first date, no matter how much the big kids told me about what to do on a date, I'd never seen one. I knew from intuition and orientation that the majority of students I was dealing with were frustrated with handouts and texts, and that if I used such materials, I wasn't really helping; I knew that I wasn't supposed to give answers, but I didn't know how to avoid it. (qtd. in Child 8)

Because he feared silences and the awkwardness of staring into the eyes of the student he did not know what to do with, he often gathered up the student's paper and started talking about commas, just to fill the awkward void.

So we hoped that these first-date jitters would be calmed a bit by moving the students through a Writing Center Internship course in four stages:

- **Stage 1:** The student becomes acquainted with her own writing processes, tries to make conscious so many of the higher-order writing concerns that are often unconscious for proficient writers, touches upon some well-established "Ideas" of the writing center, and develops her own. During this stage, she visits the writing center twice as a student.
- **Stage 2:** The student begins observing tutorial sessions, commenting upon the writing center itself, finding ways in which the theory we are reading meets the reality of the tutorial session, and speculating upon aspects of the tutorial she might have done differently--always referring to our readings for support.

- **Stage 3:** At this stage, our student dives in as tutor. At least two different experienced tutors observe our student's first two sessions and I, as the instructor of the internship, observe her third session. After three sessions in which someone peers over the student-tutor's shoulder, the student-tutor begins tutoring on her own. During each tutorial session at this stage, the focus is on assessing, describing, and evaluating each session in terms of the ways in which theory meets practice, as well as speculating upon things she feels she might have done differently--again, always referring to our readings for support.
- **Stage 4:** The final stage of this course requires the student to reassess her idea of the writing center in light of the course, our readings, our in-class discussions, and her experiences throughout the semester in order to develop her own tutoring philosophy.

Stage 1: Students Get to Know their Writing "Other" Selves

The First Essay:

This course began by requiring each student to think about, describe, and analyze her own writing processes. The first essay for this course was assigned the first day of class. This essay assignment asked each student to trace her own academic writing process, from the moment she receives an assignment to the moment she turns her final draft in to the professor who assigned it. We asked each student to consider the steps she takes to come up with a topic, gather and evaluate research, draft an essay, produce outlines or pre-writing, and so on.

For the most part, their writing processes involved various versions of procrastination. One of our students, a particularly proficient writer I must add, walked

her reader through such an elaborate series of procrastination techniques that it made my stomach hurt with worry. Here's how she describes her writing process the night before the paper is due and after a day of procrastinating:

> When I finally return home it is usually dark outside and I have not even started my paper. . . . I will arrange everything I need to write with . . . then spend an hour checking my e-mail and surfing the net . . . type my heading in perfect MLA style, and then I will write my mother at work (she lives in Germany and is at work by the time I start many of my papers).

The night goes on like this. At 12:30 a.m. she writes a sentence and then heads downstairs for a drink and a quick talk with the Resident Assistant. At 2:00 a.m. she returns and types like mad, takes a quick nap, writes the introduction, and then prints it out. This was not an atypical narrative of these students' writing processes.

But these are good writers, so we must assume that there is a lot of writing going on of which they are largely unaware. One of these last-minute writers said as much in one of her early journals when we asked her if she had any prewriting methods:

> Pre-writing methods? . . . I have no time for it. . . I do, however, do pre-thinking . . . all the time . . . especially while I'm writing other things or reading or listening or playing music. I'm always thinking about everything I'm writing. Usually everything connects together because I *cause* that to happen. It's the only way I can get anything done.

Developing a hyper-awareness of some of the writing processes that these students were doing without thinking about it was one of our course objectives. One of the most important reasons for developing this hyper-awareness of these sometimes-unconscious

writing processes is that while our writers may be able to work through various pre-writing and outlining stages without writing them down or "thinking about" them, many of the writers who come in for help in our writing centers are *not* working through these steps in their heads. Often they are not going through these steps at all. And herein lies the problem.

Journaling

Informal journal responses were an important component of this course. From the very beginning, these responses covered some varied ground. We asked our students to complete a draft of this first essay on their writing processes and visit the writing center with it before the following class meeting. The visit and our readings--Muriel Harris' "Talking in the Middle: Why Writers Need Writing Tutors" (1995) and Stephen North's classic essay "The Idea of the Writing Center" (1984)--made up the context from which we asked them to define their own ideas of what the writing center should be. Here is some of what we got:

> This was my very first experience with the writing center. I, like most people, viewed the writing center as a place where you can have papers corrected before turning them in. In fact, when I wrote a paper tracing the steps of my writing process, I took a final copy in for "proofreading." When Kendra [an experienced writing tutor] began with a "hands off approach" I was somewhat confused. Kendra asked me questions like "What do you mean here" or "Does that sentence answer the previous sentence?" I distinctly remember thinking "Hell, I don't know. That's what you're here for."

Another student envisions the role of the writing center tutor as a sort of "guide," but worries that "for me, taking a back seat in a session will be difficult. I say this, not to be full of myself, but I want to help people in any way I can. When I see a student who is struggling and wants me to 'fix' her paper, it's going to be hard to resist the urge not to tell them what to do."

Early on, than, we can see that these students had little experience with the writing center. Many understood it to be an "editing" lab or a place for remediation. While most students recognized the need for larger-scale analysis and a "hands off" approach, many were honestly concerned that they would default to the natural, yet counterproductive, methods of "taking over" and "correcting" papers. But from their very first encounter with the writing center and the readings, each student conceptualized the writing center as one that is concerned with the writing process, rather than the writing product.

Class Discussions

So what is the idea of the writing center? We passionately debated this issue for the remainder of the semester, but the first phase of the course was devoted to theory and our students' personal experiences with their own writings. We did quite a bit of role-playing and speculation, but we saved the majority of the debate regarding the gap between theory and practice for the last three-quarters of this course.

Stage 2: Observing the Tutorial Process

The second stage of this course was developed around student observations of tutorial sessions. Here our student-tutors took what they learned about writing center

theory from our readings, journals, and class discussions and watched these things in action.

The Second Essay

At this point, the students were required to write a second formal essay in which they described the sessions they observed, analyzed the sessions' effectiveness, paralleled these discoveries with aspects learned from our readings, and speculated on areas where the tutor the student observed might have done something differently--backing assumptions and observations with theory from our readings.

Journal Responses in this Second Stage

The journals at this stage continue to require students to filter theory through personal experience and class discussions, but these journal prompts also required students to consider those aspects that they learned from the sessions they observed. At this stage, we begin to interrogate not just the hypothetical ideas of the writing center, but also whether or not we can see those things being successfully implemented in a real tutorial session.

Class Discussions During the Second Stage

The subject of our in-class discussions was much the same at this stage as those discussed above. During this stage, we began to shorten our class meeting time because at this point the students have begun spending quite a bit of their time in the writing center.

Stage 3: Tutoring in the Writing Center

During the third stage, our students actually get out there and practice all that they have been watching, reading, discussing, and pondering for the past couple of months.

Essay 3: A Major Issue in Writing Center Theory

Last time we taught this course, the third essay dealt with the tutorial process as it contributed to the "Theory meets Practice" dilemma in the tutorial sessions they conducted as opposed to those they observed. This semester, I've changed it around a bit. This spring (2000), the third essay will require students to consider their extensive readings, discussions, and observations and extrapolate a major issue in writing center theory that they would like to either solve or trouble in some other way. The issues they wrote about for this essay range from the interconnectedness of an atmosphere of empowerment and the success of the collaborative method, the importance of using computers in tutorial sessions that attempt to duplicate the physicality of the writing experience "because so many students use the computer at all stages of their writing processes," and the ethical dimensions in discussions of cultural translations for ESL students.

Journal Responses During the Third Stage

At this point, our readings become a bit more specific--moving from general discussions of the writing center and the role of the writing center tutor in the first stage to discussions of ways to analyze students and their texts in order to find the best point at which to focus a given tutorial session. We discuss the importance of determining the creation of and adherence to a concept and then moving into the lower-order concerns at sentence-level. At the third stage, we begin discussing patterns of error as well as ask the students to do a stylistic analysis of a piece of their own writing. Our journals look at the tutorial sessions foremost.

Class Discussion at the Third Stage

Our class discussions at this stage concern our students' experiences in the writing center, as well as ways to determine the level at which to begin working in a given tutorial session.

Stage 4: Developing a Tailor-Made Tutoring Philosophy

The final stage of this course attempts to synthesize the whole of our course agenda. In the final essays, students are asked to formulate their own tutoring philosophies. In a way, this is what the course has been moving toward all along. Here's how one student describes the flexibility she learned to value:

> I learned the students who visit the writing center decide the way in which the session will unfold. There are no books that teach uniqueness and each tutorial session is unique in its own way. I don't know if I can develop a hard-and-fast rule to stick with during each session I tutor, but I do know if I keep the student's needs as my primary focus and remember to always let the student take ownership of [her] writing, I will be one step closer to successful tutoring.

These new, individualized-yet-educated tutoring philosophies seem to fit each tutor much better than did the pedagogical costumes our tutors trained by the "Weekly Meeting" method wore. Even more delightful was the fact that each tailor-made tutorial philosophy seemed flexible enough to allow for growth and manipulation throughout each tutor's career in the writing center.

What I Learned from my Students

Not only did they learn from their experiences, the readings, each other, and the experienced tutors, I learned quite a bit from them. One of the most difficult assignments for my teacher ego was one that asked the students to work with an essay that I had graded in a previous course. They were to help this "hypothetical" student "interpret" the instructor's "imperatives." The students in this class were brutal, noting such things as "Much too much instructional guidance here. The student seems hardly able to develop her own voice" and "How can she expect her to know what 'claim' means?" Though it was painful, I learned quite a bit from this assignment about the importance of communication through assignment design and instructor comments.

Another thing I learned from our students was the importance of proximity in each tutorial session. Though this is something that many of our articles and readings espoused--most emphatically by Brooks in his "Minimalist Tutoring"--and something I knew about and had been practicing in my conference sessions with my freshman students, our students in the Writing Center Internship really brought this point home for me. These students were very sensitive to the physical arrangement of the tutor and the student as determining either a hierarchical relationship or a peer relationship. For them, the hierarchical relationship would not do. As one student explains, "The ideal arrangement would be sitting side by side because that takes the fear away from the student. Thus, students feel comfortable on an equal field, instead of feeling like the situation is a teacher-student, authoritarian scenario."

Finally, again and again these tutor trainees came back to what I now understand to be very important practice. As one student notes in her essay on the tutor observations,

"I was most concerned with the fact that the student was not asked to write anything down, nor did the student leave with any physical evidence that the session had ever taken place. How is she going to apply them when she gets home?"

Conclusion

Though we feel that this course was successful in helping students develop their own tutoring philosophies and stocking what Muriel Harris calls their "grab bags" (5), this is one group of twelve students, one set of circumstances, and only fifteen weeks of meetings. This is being taught for the second time this spring (2000). It will be important for us to compare the results of this upcoming course, as well as successive years afterwards, in order to truly determine the effectiveness of this course in training our writing center tutors.

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